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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PROTESTS FALL SHORT OF PREDICTIONS

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The opposition Party of Regions on March 26 kicked off a self-described wave of nationwide protests and actions against the government with a rally in the Crimean capital of Simferopol. The turnout at the Simferopol rally was well below party expectations. The "nationwide" protests are primarily limited to Regions' strongholds in southern and eastern Ukraine and party claims of 100,000 protesters taking to the streets around the country seem unlikely to be met. In conjunction with the protests, Regions' leadership is threatening to block the work of the parliament if the government does not pass a coordinated anti-crisis package to the party's liking.

SHADOW GOVERNMENT MEETS IN CRIMEA

2. (SBU) The opposition Party of Regions (Regions) on March 26 held opposition shadow government meetings in Simferopol attacking President Yushchenko's and Prime Minister Tymoshenko's handling of the economic crisis. Former Prime Minister and Regions head Viktor Yanukovich called for Yushchenko and Tymoshenko's immediate resignations and for early concurrent presidential and parliamentary elections. Yanukovich said that the shadow cabinet meeting and protest rally in Simferopol were the start of a sustained push by Regions to bring down the Tymoshenko government.

3. (SBU) A protest rally held after the shadow government meeting failed to gather the 10,000 protesters that Regions predicted. Local police report that no more than 5,000 people participated in the rally and press reports indicate that most participants received payments of up to 150 hryvna (approximately 19 dollars) for their attendance. While speaking to the assembled crowd, Yanukovich quickly changed from criticizing the government's economic plan to more standard Regions campaign rhetoric such as opposition to NATO membership, official recognition of the Russian language, and friendship with Moscow.

"NATIONWIDE" PROTESTS CONCENTRATED IN THE EAST

4. (SBU) Regions called for nationwide protests on March 27 to mark the end of the current parliamentary coalition's first one hundred days in power. The locations of Regions' rallies belie their claim that this is a nationwide protest. A third of Regions' expected turnout is to occur in the city of Donesk, the party's traditional stronghold. More than two-thirds of their predicted turnout is in the three eastern

regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv. Regions did not announce any planned protests for March 27 in Western Ukraine or in many parts of Central Ukraine. The party said it expected a total of 100,000 people to join it across the country, although media reports indicate that actual turnout is running at 50 percent or less of party predictions. Regions expected about 15,000 participants in Kyiv, but initial media reports put turnout at between 3,000 to 5,000.

LOCAL ANALYSTS PLAY DOWN THE PROTESTS

15. (SBU) Local political analysts dismiss the potential effects of Regions' protests. The head of the Gorshenin Institute Kost Bondarenko described the protests as a waste of effort and money. Yuriy Yakymenko of the Razumkov Center advised Regions to focus their efforts on the Rada rather than creating "artificial" protests. An analyst from the Open Policy Institute, Ihor Zhdanov, warned that protests were unwise because worsening economic conditions could lead to social unrest. Zhdanov's concerns were echoed by Myroslav Pitysk, the Executive Director of the Ukrainian Association of Cities, who told us that Regions approached the mayors of Ukraine's major cities to support the March 27 protests. The mayors refused their support because Regions could not articulate a clear way forward after the protests and mayors were worried that once protests were started they could prove difficult to stop, according to Pitysk.

BLOCKING THE RADA THE NEXT STEP?

16. (SBU) Regions MP Hanna Herman told reporters that after the protests, Regions will concentrate its efforts on the Rada. She said that if the government does not present a coordinated anti-crisis legislative package on March 30 and

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pass the legislation on March 31 then Regions MPs would physically block the work of the Rada. The goal, she said, would be to prevent the Rada from officially convening for 30 days so that according to Herman it could give the President the chance to dissolve the parliament and call for pre-term elections. Yanukovich also threatened to disrupt the Rada's work unless Regions' demands for economic crisis legislation and help for struggling businesses were met.

TAYLOR